CONDITIONS IN THE CONGO FREE STATE.

BY BARON MONCHEUR, ENVOY EXTRAORDINARY AND MINISTER PLENIPOTENTIARY FROM BELGIUM TO THE UNITED STATES.

SOME thirty years ago, the world knew nothing about the Congo and cared even less; but, since that time, much has happened in Central Africa. Stanley has explored the country, and the Belgians, led by King Leopold, have developed it. Thirty years ago, the Congo was given over to barbarism, cannibalism, intertribal wars and the horrors of the Arab slave raids, in which 100,000 victims were killed or captured every year. To-day it is a flourishing kingdom, governed by an enlightened ruler, who has not only developed the country commercially, but who has absolutely destroyed the slave raids, who has introduced Christianity and civilization, and who has put forth every effort to improve the condition of the natives and to fulfil the motto of the State, which is "Work and Progress."

The most impartial commentary on the administration of the Congo is to be found in a comparison of the condition of the country to-day with the state of affairs existing there a quarter of a century ago. The work must be judged by its results. The tree must be known by its fruit.

This tree which has flourished so excellently in Africa, and which has brought forth such good fruit both in a commercial and in a humanitarian sense, was planted by King Leopold. Even before he came to the throne of Belgium, he realized that his densely crowded country must find an outlet for its energies in lands beyond the seas, and his keen perception singled out Central Africa as a field in which his countrymen could develop their commerce, and at the same time carry civilization to a benighted people.

"I will pierce the darkness of barbarism," he declared in the

Belgian Senate; "I will secure to Central Africa the blessing of a civilized government; and I will, if necessary, undertake this giant work alone." In pursuance of this object, he called an international geographical conference, in 1876, to consider the best means to open up "the only portion of the globe where civilization has not yet penetrated, and to plant definitively the standard of civilization on the soil of Central Africa."

All the world was invited to join in this nineteenth-century crusade, for, as His Majesty said, "we in no way claim a monopoly of the good which can and ought to be done in Africa."

National committees were formed in many countries, including the United States, but only three of these organizations succeeded in accomplishing any permanent result. The German committee sent out exploring expeditions, which ultimately led to the occupation of German East Africa, and France undertook explorations in what is now the French Congo; but it was the Belgian committee which displayed the greatest energy and perseverance.

King Leopold took the matter in hand and, by his energy and his financial aid, supported and carried on the work, which was generally considered a humane, but quixotic, enterprise. "It was thought that the undertaking was beyond his power," as Sir Edward Malet said at the Berlin Conference, and that it was "too great for success."

At first, the Belgian exploring expeditions accomplished little; but in 1879 Stanley was sent out by King Leopold, and from that time the work made rapid progress. In five years, forty government stations had been established, steamers had been placed on the Congo River above the cataracts, hundreds of tribes had been visited, five hundred treaties had been made with the native chiefs, and the country had been occupied from the coast to Stanley Falls.

The Belgian committee, led by the King, had succeeded in founding an African Empire. It was not a colony of Belgium, but a separate state, governed by the International African Association, of which King Leopold was President. In 1884, the flag of the new nation was recognized by some of the great Powers as the flag of a friendly state, the United States being the first thus to greet the blue and gold ensign of the new African Power. The Powers did not create the Congo State; they simply recognized a condition of affairs already existing, viz.: that the Congo was a properly qualified, duly constituted and efficient government.

The "Scramble for Africa" had already begun, and the relations of the different governments concerned in the centre of the continent were becoming an intensely interesting problem. Towards the end of 1884, the Powers held a Conference at Berlin "to regulate the conditions most favorable to the development of trade and civilization in certain regions of Africa, and to assure to all nations the advantages of free navigation" of the Congo and the Niger. It has been sometimes erroneously said that the Berlin Conference created the Congo Free State and placed it under the control of King Leopold, retaining a right to supervise his work and to demand an account of his stewardship. This is a misapprehension. The Congo, as mentioned above, was already a sovereign state, and had taken her place in the family of nations months before the meeting of the Berlin Conference. The object of the conference was not to create the Congo State (which would be to do a thing already done), but to define the interests of the Powers (including the Congo) in the Congo basin, to make provision for "the open-door policy," and to secure cooperation for the suppression of the slave-trade.

The Plenipotentiaries at the Conference expressed high admiration for the noble ideals of the founder of the Congo State, for the great work already accomplished and for the perseverance of the King, who, as the Italian representative said, "for eight years, with a rare constancy, has spared neither trouble nor personal sacrifice for the success of a generous and philanthropic enterprise." "Throughout a long course of years," said Sir Edward Malet, the British representative, "the King, moved by purely philanthropic ideas, has spared neither personal effort nor pecuniary sacrifice in anything which could contribute to the attainment of his object. Still, the world generally viewed these efforts with an eye almost of indifference. Here and there His Majesty aroused sympathy, but it was in some degree rather a sympathy of condolence than encouragement."

The duty of suppressing the slave-trade was to devolve chiefly upon the Congo State, which occupies the centre of the continent. The new nation willingly undertook this tremendous task, and, as "Chinese" Gordon said, "no such efficacious means of striking at the root of the slave-trade was ever presented as that which God has, I trust, opened out to us through the kind disinterestedness of His Majesty, King Leopold."

The means were, indeed, efficacious; and, to use the words of Lord Curzon, "the Congo State has done a great work and, by its administration, the cruel raids of Arab slave-dealers have ceased to exist over many thousand square miles." The slave raids were abolished, but it was only after long years of warfare and at a great expense of Belgian blood. The struggle against the Arab slave-traders put such a strain upon the slender resources of the State that, at the Brussels Conference in 1890, the Powers modified their tariff agreement, so that the Congo Government might increase its revenue for the purpose of carrying on the good work. The eradication of the slave raids was, however, but one of the Herculean tasks accomplished by the Congo Government.

What was before a wilderness has now been made a garden. The districts formerly devastated by the Arab slave-raiders are now inhabited by natives who live in security and peace. Cannibalism and human sacrifice are rapidly disappearing. The country has been opened up to Christianity, commerce and civilization. About five hundred kilomètres of railway have been built and three times that amount are under construction, 15,000 kilomètres of waterway have been explored and are plied by steamers. The telephone and telegraph lines extend over 1,500 kilomètres, roads have been constructed and automobile wagons placed on them for traffic. The whole country is being developed by means of Government stations.

At the time of the Berlin Conference (1884-5) there were forty stations; to-day there are more than two hundred. Then there were five river steamers in Congo waters; to-day the government has a fleet of one hundred. Then there was one court of justice; now, including the courts-martial, there are nearly fifty. Then there were a dozen missionaries; to-day there are about five hundred missionaries, and one hundred and fifty mission stations. In 1887 the exports amounted to $400,000; at the present time they have risen to $10,000,000.

Rubber is the chief product of the country. A few years ago, the export of rubber was a negligible quantity, but now it has gained such proportions that the price of Congo rubber regulates the rubber market of the world. The cultivation of coffee, cocoa and cotton has been encouraged also. Whereas eight years ago there were only sixty thousand coffee-trees in the plantations, now there are about two million and the growth of cotton has been so

flourishing as to cause some disquietude among the cotton-growers of Egypt.

All this moral and material development of Central Africa has been accomplished in a remarkably short time, and is one of the wonders of the world. At the beginning of the enterprise, the nations applauded King Leopold's humanitarian designs, but did not lend a helping hand. They could see the philanthropy of putting down the slave-trade, but they could not see any material or financial benefit to be derived from the operation, and, hence, generally, they stood aloof. The Belgians, inspired by the confidence of the King, were finally induced to undertake the development of Central Africa, but the capitalists and merchants of other countries did not look upon the Congo as a paying proposition. For example, the agent of one foreign government reported that "nothing could be done without a railroad, and that there was not enough traffic to support a road." The facts proved otherwise. Congo Railway shares which in 1893 could be had at 325 rose five years later to nearly 1200. In the same way, other commercial projects which had been undertaken by the Belgians turned out to be enormously productive.

In the early days of the Congo, foreign capital was much needed and would have been gladly welcomed. Foreign capitalists were not, however, "bullish" on Congo speculations: like the man with one talent, they feared to risk their money and hid it in the earth, while the more adventurous Belgians invested in Congo enterprises and have received their own with interest. Hence it is that the Belgians are now reaping the larger part of the profits from the Congo. Foreign financiers failed to grasp their opportunity, and the Belgians have gone in, occupied the field, acquired valuable concessions and remunerative trade. The foreigners who arrive now, at the eleventh hour, find the best seats at the feast already occupied.

The door is not shut, however. The Congo State maintains the "open-door policy" for trade, in accordance with the Berlin Act, and all foreigners may freely enter and buy and sell and get gain. A few foreigners have, however, claimed a wider privilege than this, and have wished to go in and occupy Government land without permission of the State.

It is a well-known principle of law, recognized in America and England and in nearly every country, that all unoccupied or

ownerless land belongs to the State. When the Congo Government took possession of the territory in Central Africa, it allowed all actual owners and occupiers of the soil, both native and non-native, to register their lands and to become legal owners. All vested interests were scrupulously respected, and unoccupied or masterless land was declared Government property, in accordance with recognized legal usage and in accordance with the practice of nations. These lands contain, among other things, valuable rubber forests, which the Government either manages on its own account, or sells or lets out on suitable terms to private concerns. Concessions are granted in a similar way in the British possessions in Africa.

As Belgians have been chiefly interested in the development of the Congo, it is natural that most of these concessions and leases have been obtained by Belgian companies. It has been claimed that these leases or concessions constitute a monopoly, and that they are an infraction of Article V. of the Berlin Act. The stipulation in question provides that: "No Power which exercises, or shall exercise, sovereign rights in the above-named regions shall be allowed to grant therein a monopoly or favor of any kind in matters of trade."

Fortunately, the Berlin Conference asked two of its members, Baron de Courcel and Baron Lambermont, to make a report on the meaning of the stipulation, and their interpretation of the article sets forth the exact meaning as understood by the High Contracting Powers.

"What is the meaning of this stipulation?" says the report submitted to the Conference by MM. de Courcel and Lambermont. "Demands have been made for enlightenment on the subject. There should be no doubt about the strict and literal meaning which should be assigned to the term in "commercial matters" *(en matière commerciale)*. It relates exclusively to traffic, to the unlimited faculty of every one to sell or to buy, to import and to export, both products and manufactured articles. No privileged situation should be created in this respect. The field remains open to free competition in the domain of commerce, but the obligation of local Governments does not go beyond this."

It is evident from this official and authoritative interpretation that the contracting Powers had in mind the idea that there should be no differential treatment of merchants, but that they

should all be allowed to buy and sell on a fair footing. This agreement has been scrupulously fulfilled by the Congo State. There is nothing in the stipulation forbidding the Government to exercise its legal and customary right of leasing land, or granting to individuals or to companies certain tracts of territory for development. The Government has an undoubted right to sell its lands, or to rent them out, or to work them itself; and the purchasers or lessees holding these concessions of land have undoubtedly a right to the product of their respective tracts.

There is nothing in this contrary to liberty of commerce or free competition. There is nothing in it antagonistic to the letter or the spirit of Article V. It is a simple exercise of property rights. A farmer in America taking an orchard on lease would expect to have a right to the exclusive use of the fruit; and, if he objected to strangers entering and gathering his crop of apples, he would hardly be called a "monopolist" on that account. The granting of these leases and concessions is sanctioned by law and by the custom of nations. It does not constitute a monopoly as understood in law or as defined at the Berlin Conference.

One of the most civilizing and useful regulations introduced by the Government of the Congo is the law requiring the natives to pay a tax in labor. This tax is not excessive. It is estimated at forty hours per month, and for this work the native is paid at the usual rate of wages. Most strict orders have been issued with a view to securing the equitable division of the labor, the prevention of arbitrary exactions and a proper remuneration for the work done.

The State gives protection and the blessings of civilization to the natives, who constitute nearly the whole of the population, and who should bear some of the burden of the Government. Labor is the commodity in which it is most convenient for the natives to pay, and it is the commodity most needed by the State. The tax in labor is a distinctly civilizing influence. It teaches the native habits of industry, and it is by habits of industry only that he can be raised to a higher plane of civilization. In paying this tax, the native receives two rewards—an immediate reward in wages and an ultimate reward in being taught to work. Africa inhabited by idle natives is hopeless, but Africa inhabited by an industrious population is full of magnificent possibilities.

In order to secure the collection of this tax, it is necessary to treat the natives with paternal kindness. It is not by cruel treatment, nor by maiming them, nor by driving them into the bush that the State can obtain the manual labor which it needs. The native is one of the elements necessary for the development of the country, and the Government is too far-seeing, as well as too humane, to allow the destruction of the blacks, by whose hands alone the country can be developed. Mistreatment of the natives is not in accordance with commercial principles, much less with humanitarian ideas. To permit such a thing would be both a crime and a commercial mistake.

As officials and commercial agents are not recruited exclusively from the ranks of the archangels, cases of cruelty to natives will occasionally occur in all attempts to govern inferior races. In the Congo, such crimes are now rare and are severely punished. Not very long ago, some agents of a certain Congo company were guilty of cruelty, for which they were promptly tried and condemned; and it was observed that, immediately after these cruel acts, the profits of the concern fell off 98 per cent., which shows that maltreatment of natives and huge profits cannot go hand in hand. The very prosperity of the State is an indication that the natives are not treated harshly.

The State has sought to throw every safeguard round the blacks by means of the courts of justice, and also by means of a special Commission for the Protection of Natives, which is composed of Catholic and Protestant missionaries.

The Congo Free State has always considered the help of the missionaries as "indispensable to the realization of its views"; and it should be observed that the large majority of missionaries speak very highly of the good work the Government has done for the uplifting of the native and for civilization and Christianity.

Mgr. van Ronslé, one of the best known missionaries in the Congo, who was the first President of the Commission for the Protection of Natives, has written a very interesting letter from Leopoldville under date of July 28, 1903, as follows:

"The State condemns the abuses which come to its knowledge. The law is well organized, extends like a network over all the State territory, and is carried out in some degree independently of the administration. I have known a great many of the magistrates—very honorable men, who had their responsibilities very much at heart, performing

their duty in an independent and conscientious manner. How, then, is it possible to affirm that atrocities are erected into a system patronized by the State?

"I make it my duty in the present circumstances to pay the Government a tribute of admiration and gratitude — of admiration, in presence of the vast and fine organization that it has succeeded in establishing here after such a few years, and which astonishes even those who wish to injure it; of gratitude, for the benevolent protection and efficacious support which it has given to our missions."

Protestant missionaries, like Mr. W. H. Bentley, and the Rev. Dr. Grenfell who has been in the Congo for twenty-five years, have written of the administration in the highest terms of praise. Out of five hundred missionaries, it is only a handful who have expressed an unfavorable view of the Government.

An illustration of the reckless way in which stories of "atrocities" have been manufactured is furnished by the Burrows Case, which came up for trial in London last March. Mr. Burrows had written a book, which came out more than a year ago under the title "The Curse of Central Africa," and which contained many sensational accusations against the Government of the Congo and against the Belgian officers in its service. It was a book which was accepted by many as true history, and was quoted far and wide. One of the Belgian officers concerned, Captain de Keyser, brought suit against Mr. Burrows in the English courts; and, when the case came up, the whole fabric of calumny crumbled away. Neither the author nor the publishers produced a single witness or piece of evidence in support of their accusations, nor did they themselves go into the witness-box to explain or to attempt to justify their conduct. Captain de Keyser won the suit, with £500 damages, and the book was ordered suppressed.

One of the most interesting points about the case was the testimony tending to show that the book had been written, "not necessarily for publication," and that the publishers and author had tried to induce the Congo Government to buy up the manuscript for the purpose of suppressing it. There was produced in court an agreement signed by Mr. Burrows which reads as follows:

"I hereby agree to pay to Mr. John George Leigh the sum of £500 if and when my publishers, R. A. Everett & Co., receive the amount which may be paid by the Belgian Government for the non-publication of the manuscript by myself and him entitled 'The Curse of Central Africa.'

In case the book is published, I agree to pay Mr. Leigh one-third of the profits."

In addition to such attacks, a number of false reports about the administration of the Congo have been put in circulation by well-meaning people who have accepted the idle tales of the natives without investigation. The testimony of the natives is utterly untrustworthy. As a rule, they will say anything that suits their interest or their caprice. Not long ago, a number of them accused a certain Protestant missionary of murdering the engineer of the mission launch, and they maintained their accusation with great unanimity and persistency, although there was not the slightest foundation for the story. Disregard for the truth seems to be characteristic of the natives, not only in the Congo, but all over Central Africa. Mr. H. L. Duff of the British Central-African Administration, in his recent book, has called attention to this same unfortunate habit among the natives of Nyassaland.

Calumnies against the Congo have received wide circulation, but in the end truth will prevail. A great work has been done in Central Africa for humanity, for Christianity and for civilization. It is the master mind of the King that has planned the work, and it is his generosity which has made it possible. Not only did he support the enterprise in its early struggle for existence, but even now, when the budgets of the State have reached a more satisfactory condition, the King generously declines to accept the revenues from the Crown lands (which, in ordinary course, should go to the Sovereign), and has turned the money into a fund, managed by Trustees, for the improvement and development of the country.

"All men," said Stanley, referring to the Congo, "all men who sympathize with good and noble works—and this has been one of unparalleled munificence and grandeur of ideas—will unite in hoping that King Leopold, the Royal Founder of this unique humanitarian and political enterprise, whose wisdom rightly guided it and whose moral courage bravely sustained it, amid varying vicissitudes, to a happy and successful issue, will long live to behold his Free State expand and flourish to be a fruitful blessing to a region that was, until lately, as dark as its own deep, sunless forest shades."

BN. MONCHEUR.